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WASHINGTON POST
31 December 1984

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Reaganisms of the Year

Let us celebrate this last day of the old year and look forward to the new by recalling the many ways that President Reagan enriched the language, the political dialogue and the foreign-policy debate in 1984.

One of the election year's major topics, which the president has helped to make an issue for the ages, is the federal budget deficit. Reagan addressed this issue cogently on Aug. 27 by explaining his one-time scholastic deficiencies to two junior high school students who had displayed to him their mathematical competence.

"If I confessed to you how far I was behind both of you in these examples, you'd know why we had a budget deficit," Reagan said.

Poverty took a back seat to the deficit in 1984. But it remained enough of an issue that Reagan was asked about it Oct. 7 in the first presidential debate. "Yes, there has been an increase in poverty, but it is a lower rate of increase than it was in the preceding years before we got here," he responded. "It has begun to decline, but it is still going up."

It is a sign of the perilous times that in 1984 foreign policy became more important to the administration than before and produced by far the most enduring Reaganisms. While it is difficult to pick the most distinctive, my favorite was the president's observation in his U.N. speech Oct. 1: "I believe that the future is far nearer than most of us would dare hope."

Two days later, speaking to students at Bowling Green State University, Reagan explained why he wanted better relations with the Soviet Union, saying: "We want it because peace in America is such an attractive way to live that war is a terrible interruption."

This comment was spontaneous. Reagan was somewhat more deliberately mischievous on Aug. 11 when he warmed up for his weekly political radio speech with an industrial-strength Reaganism that will

be long remembered: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that would outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes."

Nonetheless, the president is less worried about Soviet military power than he was in the bad old days before his defense buildup turned the tide. As Reagan explained at a news conference in May, when he was reassuring Americans that they were not endangered by the increase of Soviet submarines off U.S. coasts: "If I thought there was some reason to be concerned about them, I wouldn't be sleeping in this house tonight."

Demonstrating that the Soviets are not the obsession they were in the days when Reagan described the adversary as the "evil empire," the president explained his new perspective to congressional leaders in early June, saying: "If they want to keep their Mickey Mouse system, that's okay."

The Chinese communists are even more okay, especially after Reagan made his first visit to what he used to call "Red China." The president was so impressed with the spirit of capitalism that he thinks is rampant on the Chinese mainland that he referred to the country upon his return in May as "so-called Communist China."

Wherever he traveled, Reagan tried to be helpful. He had good advice in Shanghai for Chinese students at the University of Fudan who might be tempted to follow in his footsteps. "You'd be surprised how much being a good actor pays off," he told them.

Closer to home, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua remained a problem, though not an insurmountable one. On Nov. 3, at the John Wayne home in Winterset, Iowa, Reagan dismissed a CIA-sponsored manual that discussed "removal" of Sandinista officials from office. Reagan found nothing sinister in this advocacy, saying: "You just say to the fellow that's sitting there in the office—you're not in the office anymore."

Reaganisms also invested the reelection campaign. One of the most interesting was the exhortation to Republicans in Las Vegas on Feb. 7. "We've got a job to do, and one of the best things that we can do—we know what you can do for us—it's that mouth-to-mouth, that hand-to-hand contact and that telling about the differences in the record," he said.

But it was not the president's fault. As he told an audience here on Feb. 23, "They tell me I'm the most powerful man in the world. I don't believe that. Over there in the White House someplace, there's a fellow that puts a piece of paper on my desk every day that tells me what I'm going to be doing every 15 minutes. He's the most powerful man in the world."

Small wonder that, with such comments as that and such columns as this one, the president didn't hold many formal news conferences. As Reagan put it when he opened a "mini-news conference" on Sept. 11, "I didn't have anything else to do."